

## “Mabo and After: Trauma Envy in White Australia”

Australian history is usually conceived as the spinning out of a narrative of settlement and progress beginning in 1788. This could only be achieved through the recourse to the doctrine of *terra nullius* (empty land), which served the purpose of effacing in the process of settlement the prior modes of emplacement of Aboriginal cultures. At the same time it can be shown that such a construction of historical knowledge, along with the vociferous identity politics based upon it, has been consistently plagued by an uncanny return of the repressed (‘prehistoric’) dimension of the national experience, to the point when the discursive conditions were gathered whereby the 1992 Mabo judgement could become a reality, and the dispossession of the Aborigines acknowledged and redressed in part.

It would be tempting to make sense of this development in terms of critical whiteness studies, which tends to view race as a constructed reality depending on a constant interplay of signifiers, so that the constitution of whiteness in Australia always carried a trace of its suppressed other(s). Similarly trauma studies, in view of its insistence that ‘the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another’, with the result that ‘we are implicated in each other’s traumas’ (Caruth), might potentially offer a reclamatory purchase on the flip side of official history, precisely by virtue of a new sensitivity to the fraught unconscious of national issues.

However, my suggestion is that, the above notwithstanding, neither of those theories travels easily to the settler colonies, where there is a risk that they might be called upon to perform the service of allowing the beneficiaries of conquest to posture as its victims. Trauma studies in particular tends to emerge within cultures that have a stake in investing the experience of suffering with the value of moral capital. In Australia, such gesturing towards the dividends of suffering on the part of the settlers can never be wholly divorced from the felt legitimacy of their continued occupation of stolen territories; whilst it implicitly favours, in the name of the egalitarian nature of pain, a political status quo which functions to perpetuate the longstanding social and economic inequalities created by history. In this context, the notion of ‘trauma envy’ (Mowitt) will do duty as an index of the structure of feeling that seeks a wound to legitimate itself morally in keeping with the unchanging agenda of a colonialist identity politics. My paper will attempt not to lose sight of this ethical quandary when examining the slippages which occur in the location of historical trauma in Andrew McGahan’s novel *The White Earth* (2005).

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